

A Theology of Work

Written by Calvin Fox

Saturday, 18 October 2008 17:37 - Last Updated Saturday, 18 October 2008 17:51

Jesus said to them, "my Father is always at his work ." -John 5:17

"In the beginning, God created", i.e.- God worked. This is the first thing said in the Bible about God's activity. God is a worker. Work is intrinsic to who God is.

Human beings are the image or likeness of God. That means (among other things) that working is intrinsic to our nature. We were created to work. Working is an essential part of who we are as human beings. This means that working is not a curse or the consequence of the Fall.

Working is good. Working has inherent value and meaning and dignity. The person with the most seniority, power and authority in the universe, God, never ceases working (cf John 5:17)

Work is not something to "get out of" or to avoid by delegating it to others. Human beings may retire from employment, but should never strive for retirement from working itself.. To cease working would be to cease being fully human- to miss meaning and purpose in living.

Definition of the verb "to work":

1. to bring to pass
2. to fashion or create a useful or desired product by expending labor or exertion...
3. to prepare for use ...; to bring into a desired form ...
4. to set or keep in motion, operation, or activity : cause to operate or produce

Definition of the noun "work"-

1. activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something
a : sustained...mental effort to achieve an objective or result

But what kind of work? Are we talking about all work or work with a particular purpose?

Christians commonly see work, like non-Christians do, primarily as a "job"- a means to the end of providing for the needs and wants of their family and/or as an opportunity to witness or minister to co-workers or customers. Sometimes, "work" is just the effort to get something that needs doing done. All that is good, but there is a lot more. Rarely do Evangelicals think of work in terms of God's work. All our work, ideally, is meant to be the work of God. That is the direction or use of what we "do" in life.

The Work of God is Two-Fold

John 5:17 Jesus said to them, "my Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

John 4:34 "my food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

The "work", of which Jesus speaks here, includes more than the work of Redemption, it includes the work of creation

Heb 1:3 the Son is ...sustaining all things (including the Creation) by his powerful word.

In Psalm 147, see how God is constantly working, using His Word to both sustain the natural world and to administer justice. They are both His work. Actually, they are inseparable-

Psalm 147:2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. 3 he heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. 4 He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. 5 great is our lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. 6 the Lord sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground. 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make music to our God on the harp. 8 He covers the sky with clouds; He supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. 9 He provides food for the cattle

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and for the young ravens when they call. 15 He sends his command to the earth; His Word runs swiftly. 16 He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes. 17 He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can withstand His icy blast? 18 He sends His Word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow. 19 He has revealed His Word to Jacob, His laws and decrees to Israel.

1st God is continuously involved in the development and preservation of His creation- the “natural world” - everything from controlling the weather to feeding sparrows.

Psalm 135:6 the Lord does whatever pleases Him, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the deeps. 7 He brings up rain clouds from the ends of the earth; He sends out lightning with the rain, and brings the winds out of his storehouse. See Psalm 104, et al

Ps 111:2 great are the works of the Lord; they are [to be] pondered by all [and all are to] delight in them.

The early chapters of Genesis make this very clear. Human beings are to be God’s co-workers in His work of developing and preserving Creation (known as the Cultural Mandate).

Specifically, all human beings--men & women together-- have as their work, the care and cultivation of the natural environment which God has created. All people, especially Christians, are to be environmentalists (in that sense. This is not the same as “Going green”.) Working with God, we are to cultivate the wilderness into a fertile, productive, garden and more. The word cultivate is related to culture. Culture, in turn, does not involve a cult to worship the Wild; rather Culture involves Civilization. Whatever a person actually does to contribute or achieve any of this is intrinsically important and valuable. It is good. It is meaningful. It is to be enjoyed.

Eccles 3:12 I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. 13 that everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil--this is the gift of God.

Eccles 5:18 I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him--for this is his lot. 19 moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work--this is a gift of God.

Human beings are to find their satisfaction, meaning and purpose in toiling side by side with the Creator in his work of preserving and cultivating the world God has created. The responsibility of Christians, day to day, is to creatively “work the earth.”

Ps 8:4 what is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him? 5 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You made him ruler over the works of Your hands; You put every thing under his feet: 7 all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

This responsibility is usually referred to as the “Cultural Mandate”. I prefer, the “Stewardship Mandate”. This is a corollary to the Sabbath. Everyone is to work the earth for six days each week and cease that work on the seventh, not only to rest, but to celebrate and enjoy the natural environment and the work accomplished during the week the Creation in its cultivation and care.

Does the “Stewardship Mandate” mean that everyone is called to be a farmer of some kind, a landscape architect, a professional environmentalist, etc? While the children of Adam & Eve became farmers; their extended family and descendents became builders, tradesmen, artisans,

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musicians. Cain founded the first “city”. Individual people can know what type of work God expects them to do under the stewardship mandate by identifying what their God-given abilities and gifts are.

EXO 35:30 Then Moses said to the Israelites, "See, the LORD has chosen [PEOPLE] 31 and he has filled [THEM] with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts--32 to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, 33 to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship.34 And he has given ... the ability to teach others. 35 He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers ...and weavers--all of them master craftsmen and designers. ..every skilled person to whom the LORD has given skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing ...are to do the work...

ISA 28:23 Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear what I say. 24 When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually? Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil? 25 When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? 26 His God instructs him and teaches him the right way. 27 Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a stick. 28 Grain must be ground to make bread; so one does not go on threshing it forever. Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it, his horses do not grind it. 29 All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.

God gives such abilities and talents to everyone, non-believer as well as believer. All of these gifts have to do with what are considered today to be “secular work”. This is an example of Common Grace. The Fall did not change that.

MATT 5:45...your Father in heaven...causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

The exercise of all these gifts and talents is doing the work of the Lord. Romans 12:1 take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering. [the Message, a paraphrase]

Gifts are given to believers for specifically Christian ministry- Rom 12, 1 Cor 12, Eph 4, 1 Pet 4, but the truth to get a handle on is this: All work, Christian or “Secular”, is good work, God's work, when it is done God's way.

1 Corinthians 10:31 Whatever you do [engineer, carpenter, artist, etc], do it for the glory of God.

This even includes the work a slave may be called to do.

Colossians 3:22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. □

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2nd God is also continuously involved in works of justice and public righteousness. Many passages that talk of God's work as Creator, also describe His work of justice. The Cultural Mandate involves both. Consider again Psalm 147-

Psalm 147:2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. 3 he heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. 4 He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. 5 great is our lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. 6 the Lord sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.

Psalm 146 He will sing praises to my God who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps his promise for ever; who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; He sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked. The Lord shall reign for ever

God's Reign is God's work of Justice, in which He condemns and punishes oppressors and vindicates and delivers the oppressed. God is moral and we live in His moral world. God rules the world and upholds His Law. His Justice will be served. Those who obey His Law will be blessed. Those who transgress His Law will be cursed.

We have seen in Genesis 4:10 and chapter 6 that the blood of innocent victims cries out to God and that He is totally horrified with violence and corruption among human beings- so much so that He destroys the earth with the flood in order to start all over again. The city of Sodom is commonly connected with "sodomy", but the Bible also says - this was the sin of ...Sodom: she [was] arrogant, overfed and unconcerned [and] did not help the poor and needy. -Ezekiel 16:49

We all know what happened to Sodom! The illustrations of the reign of God are innumerable. Yet, the Church today in many places in America remains apathetic or indifferent to issues of Justice. Often we hear that concern for such matters is not spiritual and are really none of the Church's business. Christians that are passionate about Justice are considered to be leftist Liberals. Well, when Israel neglects justice while keeping religious rites, God is grieved.

Amos 5:21 "I hate, I despise...I cannot stand your assemblies. 22 ...even though you bring me ...offerings, I will not accept them. ...I will have no regard for them. 23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your [Praise Teams and Choirs]. 24 but let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Justice is the work of God. That does not mean anything any one does in the name of Justice is, in fact, pursuing Justice as God defines it. The Justice of God is grounded and governed by the Word and Law of God. Anything that anyone does to establish, practice and extend that kind of Justice is doing the work of God. Outstanding examples of such work is that of those who oppose Abortion and Euthanasia and those who find ways to support Christians being persecuted and innocent victims of genocide and ethnic cleansing and those whose basic human rights and freedoms are being denied around the world.

SUMMARY: Human beings, especially Christians, are to find their satisfaction, meaning and purpose in working, side by side, with God in His two-fold work of Cultivating the earth and securing Justice in society. I have purposely not mentioned the work of God in redeeming the Elect. Much is written about that on this website and in many other places. In no way am I

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neglecting or minimizing it. However, in my experience and reading, the work of God discussed in this Essay is very much neglected or minimized, even denied, by many Reformed Believers. Why is this?

Holism vs Dualism

Since God is involved in both the work of environmentalism & social justice, human beings, especially Christians, must also be involved in both. Commonly, Christians will emphasize one, or the other but many reject both, in favor of traditional evangelism. Why do they do this? They do not understand that the Kingdom of God is all encompassing: Christ is Lord of every thing. Life is meant to be approached “holistically”, Holistic means “relating to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems rather than with the analysis of, treatment of, or dissection into parts eg- holistic medicine attempts to treat both the mind and the body, holistic ecology views man and the environment as a single system.

Ephesians 1:9 [God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 --to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. [God] 20 raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 20 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. 22 and God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything.

God views life holistically. However, Christians tend to divide the stuff of life into categories - they view life dualistically and then separate and rank the categories-

God eternal souls spiritual sacred evangelism church

world temporal bodies physical secular all other work

Categories are valid and necessary. The problem comes in the way they are separated. Life becomes compartmentalized and seldom, or only occasionally, interconnected. This means that the categories above the line seldom, if ever, have anything to do with the categories below the line. But, God in Christ is meant to be Lord of- involved in- all the categories

1 Corinthians 10:31 ...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. What does this have to do with work? Traditionally, Christians have held 3 assumptions that effect how they see “work”-

1. eternal over temporal 2. spiritual above secular 3. souls before bodies These assumptions lead to the following conclusions:

1. work to reach “souls” for Christ- takes priority over all other work
2. working for what is eternal is more important than working for things that “rust”
3. Work that is “spiritual” (often, intellectual), is more valuable than the physical.

These assumptions ignore the doctrines of Creation, Incarnation and Resurrection et al.

Scripture teaches the inter-connectedness of all these categories. Separating and prioritizing them is contrary to Scripture. The eternal, temporal, sacred, secular, souls and bodies are all parts of one whole- interconnected and inseparable. Therefore, work that involves the temporal, secular, and physical is just as much God's work as that which involves the eternal, sacred and spiritual. We must not be dualists.

What about the Dualism between God and Satan?

There is enmity- cosmic warfare- God and his arch-enemy, Satan. Satan is a created being, he is not equal to God. This conflict is between two spiritual beings, but not between two Gods.

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The dualism we have been discussing is not the same at all. It is about Christians dividing up and compartmentalizing the “stuff”, the activities, the organization of every day human life. God and Satan (or demonic “powers”) can each invade all those compartments. In fact, both God and Satan want to be in control of each those compartments. Our concern is that Christians not abandon any of them, or separate their Christian mind and life from any of them. This allows Satan to illegally rule there. Our part of the cosmic conflict is to help extend the reign of Christ into all areas. (His Kingdom is holistic).

2 Cor. 10:5 ...we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

5 Standards for Work as God intends it to be

The Biblical mandate to rule & subdue (have dominion over) the earth and its creatures is consistently misused. All kinds of selfishness, greed, waste and exploitation are justified with it. A standard is needed to decide whether specific work is as God intends it to be. When is a specific work activity (or work environment) bad and to be rejected.? What is the Standard to judge?

That standard is the “image of God”. It enables us to answer these questions biblically. God did not say: “I have made human beings. They have my authority to rule the earth.” God said: “I have made humans to be like me, my image. Because they are my image, they are to rule the earth.” The Image is not itself the mandate to have dominion. The Image determines how we are to have dominion. Human beings are to obey the “cultural mandate” as bearers of the image of God. The image is meant to govern the entire enterprise. This has practical implications: to act according to the image of God is to act according to the characteristics of God, as follows:

1. The Personal- the “person”

All that we do must value and respect “persons” above all- not simply “people”, but all that is meant by “person”. A “person” has infinite value. A “person” is defined by the ways in which God is a “person”. It means a living being who is self conscious, knowable, who communicates meaningfully and can share in “personal” relationships; a person has a will and makes considered judgments. Like God, all Persons have the faculties of rationality, creativity, morality, communality and spirituality.

Work which demeans, exploits, neglects, injures or destroys persons is evil

2. The Rational- rationality

God thinks and makes decisions in a reasonable, logical, orderly way All of creation reflects these qualities of its creator.

Work of any kind which is essentially, characteristically, unreasonable, illogical or chaotic is not acceptable

3. The Creative- creativity

All work should seek, in appropriate ways, to be creative, artistic and beautiful, as is God and the natural world He has made.

Work which is uncreative, boring, deadening, repulsive or ugly should be rejected

4. The Moral- morality

All work must be moral, righteous and just, as God defines those terms in his Word.

Work which is immoral, sinful or corrupt, must be rejected

5. The Communal- community

The work of cultivating and of culture must be done in, of and by a community (“Community” could simply be one’s co-workers, a team or unit. It could be a Company. Community could be

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neighborhood or town. etc.) Work must seek to promote the welfare and good of all members of the (appropriate) community. We are our brothers and sisters keepers, accountable for the welfare of all. Work that is good will serve the good of the whole.

Work which is done for selfish purposes or for self aggrandizement is not good. Work that harms the community or violates personal relationships in the community is sinful.

□□□□□ **SUMMARY**

Allowing the image of God concept to guide us, requires these 5 principles. All employment, every project and work environments should be evaluated on these terms. Work that respects and protects persons and is reasonable, beautiful, moral and good for the community is good work. Work that is dehumanizing, unreasonable, ugly, immoral or selfish is bad work. Christians are not to engage in "bad" work or support the work of others that will knowingly harm, ruin, destroy or otherwise exploit themselves, their community or the Creation. Taking this stand and explaining why, would be a strong witness for God, the Creator. This could lead to reform –to the redemption of that work- or to demotion or loss of employment. That loss would be the cost of discipleship, of being faithful to God in that situation. God will provide when we are faithful.